

CHECK VALVE FOR MICRO ELECTRO MECHANICAL STRUCTURE DEVICES

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

5 The present invention relates to a check valve for micro electro mechanical structure devices (MEMS), and in particular pertains to a check valve which is adapted to be employed in connection with micro electro mechanical structure devices which are intended to be employed with the use of high-pressure fluids constituting working fluids.

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2. Discussion of the Prior Art

The utilization of check valves in the most diverse designs and configurations thereof is well known in numerous and essentially unrelated technologies. In essence, such check valves which are utilized in connection with MEMS devices employing supercritical
15 fluids are adapted to diverse potential uses, including being incorporated into micro pump systems and hydraulic circuit systems, wherein the combination of such systems and MEMS devices may provide micro refrigeration and heat exchanger structures.

In addition to the foregoing applications, the use of MEMS devices is adapted for
20 integration thereof into processes for producing semiconductor chips and/or related electronic components. However, physical limitations which are evident through the introduction of fluids within the MEMS devices are caused by the surface tension of the fluid within the extremely small sized structures. Consequently, the use of supercritical high-pressure fluids which are combined with a check valve as a component of the
25 overall structure and system enables the introduction of the fluid in order to fill the MEMS device and, then to be able to lock in the fluid at the required operating pressures. These devices become active when the working surface pressures and

temperatures are elevated, causing a closed-loop pumping system, or a hydraulics and/or refrigeration loop to initiate operation.

Ordinarily, the loading or charging of MEMS devices with a supercritical fluid may be achieved through the intermediary of a processing cycle with a supercritical pressure

5 vessel, and wherein the device is constructed with the incorporation of a suitable check valve which is initially in an open (through-flow) position at atmospheric pressure.

Upon a pressure chamber of the device containing a workpiece which is to be treated being charged with a fluid to supercritical temperatures and pressures, that particular fluid will then be able to flow into the MEMS device due to an absence of surface

10 tension in the fluid while in the supercritical phase. Thereafter, after a specified period of time, the chamber pressure is relieved, and the pressure drop will cause the fluid in the MEMS hydraulic system to attempt to escape, causing the check valve to close and thereby trapping the fluid in the structure. Thereafter, the check valve being at atmospheric pressure, will be permanently locked into the system.

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For instance, the uses of cryogenic microcoolers employ a condenser, evaporator, flow restriction and counterflow heat exchangers have been described in article by Johannes Burger, et al., and titled "169 Kelvin Cryogenic Microcooler Employing a Condenser, Evaporator, Flow Restriction and Counterflow Heat Exchanges" in the 2001 IEEE, pages 418 - 421, presented at the 14th IEEE International Conference of Micro Electro Mechanical Systems, Switzerland, January 21 - 25, 2001.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Accordingly, in order to be able to accomplish the foregoing functioning in a simple

25 and advantageous manner, through the incorporation of a novel check valve which is adapted to be incorporated into systems with MEMS devices operating with

supercritical fluids, the present invention provides for the check valve being equipped with a bypass channel including a freely moveable plug structure which, in the open position of the valve enables the ingress of supercritical fluids under high

30 superatmospheric pressures, and subsequent to the filling of the system, let down to

atmospheric pressure, causes the plug to be moved into a permanent valve-closed position.

Pursuant to another embodiment of the invention, the check valve may incorporate a flexible valve element in the form of a flap member, which in the open position enables the flow from a narrow channel into a wider channel for loading the particular system with a supercritical fluid under a superatmospheric pressure, and subsequent to the filling of the system and let down thereof to atmospheric pressure, enables the flexible plug or flap member to provide a sealing element between the wide inner channel and a narrower outer channel to form a permanent closure for the MEMS device in which the check valve is installed.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE ACCOMPANYING DRAWINGS

Reference may now be made to the following detailed description of preferred embodiments of the inventive check valve for MEMS devices, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings; in which:

Figure 1 illustrates, generally diagrammatically a longitudinal sectional view through a first embodiment of the check valve pursuant to the invention;

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Figure 2 illustrates the check valve of Fig. 1 in the open flow condition in connection with the filing of a MEMS device with a supercritical fluid;

Figure 3 illustrates the check valve in the closed condition subsequent to completing the filling and pressure let-down of the MEMS device;

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Figure 4 illustrates, generally diagrammatically, a longitudinal sectional view through a second embodiment of the check valve pursuant to the invention;

Figure 5 illustrates a sectional view taken along line 5- 5 in Figure 4; and

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Figure 6 illustrates the check valve of Figure 4 in its closed condition.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

5 Referring now in specific detail to the drawings, and particularly Figure 1 through 3, in Figure 1 there is illustrated a check valve 10 which is adapted to be employed in connection with MEMS devices (not shown) utilizing supercritical fluids. The check valve 10, as illustrated in Figure 1, provides for a first inlet conduit section 12 extending into an enlarged volumetric area or chamber 14 which contains a freely movable plug 10 16 which is adapted to move axially in the direction of double headed arrow A, depending upon the operating conditions of the check valve, as detailed hereinbelow.

The check valve 10 further includes, in an essentially coaxially relationship with the inlet conduit section 12, an outlet or discharge conduit section 18, whereby the chamber 15 14 containing the freely movable plug 16 and which is located intermediate conduit sections 12 and 18 in flow communication therewith, includes a bypass channel 20 extending in flow communication between the chamber 14 and the outlet conduit section 18.

OPERATION OF THE CHECK VALVE

20 In implementing the filling of an MEMS system, such as charging the system with a supercritical fluid; for example, such as a cryogenic cooler or heater arrangement, or a workpiece treatment pressure vessel, the superatmospheric pressure of the fluid being conveyed into and through the check valve 10 causes the freely movable plug 16 to 25 come into contact with the upstream wall 22 of the outlet duct 18, thereby causing the pressurized fluid to enter outlet duct 18 through the bypass channel 20, and to discharge in the direction of the arrow B shown in Figure 2 into the MEMS device and the associated fluid system.

30 Upon the desired amount of supercritical fluid having been charged into the MEMS device, during which period of time the plug 16 is in the valve-open position due to the

differential pressure, as shown in Figure 2, the processing system is drawn-down to atmospheric pressure. This will cause the plug 16 of the check valve 10, as shown in Figure 3 of the drawings, to assume a closed position against the downstream end 24 of the inlet conduit 12 maintaining fluid within the MEMS device, with the freely movable
5 plug 14 shown forced by the lower pressure at the valve inlet end into the closed position against the discharge opening or end 24 of the inlet conduit section 12. This resultingly produces the permanent closure of the check valve 10 wherein the latter forms a component of the entire MEMS device and the fluid flow system operatively associated therewith.

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Referring to the embodiment illustrated in Figures 4 through 6 of the drawings, in which an inlet conduit 26 of the check valve 28 is a narrow channel communicating with a wider discharge outlet channel 30 leading to the MEMS device through an aperture 32 past a flexible valve plate or plug 34. The operation of this check valve is
15 essentially analogous to that described in connection with the check valve 10 of Figures 1 through 3, and wherein upon the let-down of the pressure in the processing system down to atmospheric pressure the flexible valve plate 34 will bend about a bending edge 36 so as to seal the wide channel 30 with respect to the narrow channel 26 by means of the pressure differential applied against the valve plate from the inlet side of the check
20 valve. This causes the valve plate 34 to permanently close the check valve 28 and to become a constituent of the entire MEMS.

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From the foregoing description of the check valve 10 or 28 this enables MEMS devices, such as micro refrigeration or heat exchangers, closed loop pumping system, closed
25 loop hydraulic devices or supercritical fluid workpiece treatment vessels to be able to be employed for new applications, wherein the components for filling and maintaining supercritical fluid in the MEMS devices incorporate the inventive check valves for these purposes.

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Moreover, the check valve and the MEMS device can also be used in connection with the processing and manufacture of semiconductor devices.

From the foregoing it becomes readily apparent that the check valve 10, 28 provides a novel and inexpensive structure which may be easily incorporated into the MEMS device systems in a highly advantageous and versatile manner.

- 5 While the invention has been particularly shown and described with respect to preferred embodiments thereof, it will be understood by those skilled in the art that the foregoing and other changes in form and details may be made therein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.